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Org 1 Peace Corps

Org 1 Americans for
Community Cooperationin Other Countries
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Some Reflections On the Peace Corps

THERE WAS something about the Peace Corps that always gave me a charge. It was such a bushy-tailed operation: everybody wore the same required informal dress, the chief administrators spent their entire days going from one meeting to another—rather like a permanent, floating crap game—and, above all, the Peace Corps had MORALE. When Sarge Shriver came into a room and turned on that 250-watt smile, one could feel the vibrations.

There were some bureaucratic problems. It was often hard to find out what the Peace Corps was doing. The guy who might know was always at a committee meeting and he might have to call two further meetings of other committees to obtain precise information. Unless the only man who knew had just left to become the director in Madagascar. Elsewhere in the government one could always find the tribal historian, a crone who had been around since 1903 when she began as a postal clerk, and knew everything. I never found a secretary at the Peace Corps who had worked there more than three weeks.

THERE USED to be an interminable argument over who had really thought up the idea—Hubert Humphrey was a leading contender—though the notion was hardly original. It was simply a secular, government-sponsored missionary program. Despite rumors to the contrary, most religious missionaries, particularly in the 20th century, have done a great deal more than spread the faith of their choice. A shirtsleeve cousin of mine, Beth O'Brien (alias Sister M. Thomas Novak),

physician who has set up hospitals in parts of the world that would put off a Green Beret. She is currently in the back country of Peru. Protestant missionaries have put a tremendous amount of expert agricultural effort into India and Brazil.

The Peace Corps' big problem was that, by and large, its volunteers at first were not experts in anything. They substituted dedication and enthusiasm for specialized knowledge. Thus it was predictable, as I wrote in 1961, that "the initial reaction to these dedicated, ebullient young Americans may well be one of annoyance and envy." And it was equally predictable that the volunteers, wanting to be loved, would be highly susceptible to anti-Americanism, would try to demonstrate to the locals that they were opposed to imperialism, colonialism, etc. The war in Vietnam served as the catalyst for a whole series of demonstrations by members of the Peace Corps against American policy.

Similarly, volunteers serving in undemocratic states often displayed sympathy for local—usually student—revolutionary movements—while being accused of CIA affiliations by the Communist press. Any way you looked at it, the situation was frustrating, particularly for young idealists who had gone out to save the world and discovered that the world is not play-dough.

AFTER THE PARADE come the street cleaners. Now Sarge and his troops (former volunteers are his political cadres) are off to new pastures, morale is shot, and President Nixon's

Director Joseph H. Blatchford is busily engaged in restructuring the Peace Corps around technical expertise—and encouraging the volunteers to keep out of politics.

Fundamentally he is on sound ground (the private group "ACCION" which he founded for work in Latin America has a good reputation), but at the same time the old Peace Corps will be missed. The young volunteers may not have saved the world, although many of them got an education. In fact, the impact of service on the participants was far more important than on their host countries. And in my perverse way, I even enjoyed their political antics—the American addiction to freedom can be embarrassing on occasion, yet it can also be contagious. All in all, it is something worth exporting to the "Third World."

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